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The Memory of the "Revival Process" in the Newest Bulgarian Novel (2011–2017)

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The aim of this article is to explore the most recent literary representations of the so-called "Revival process" in Bulgarian history or the renaming of the Bulgarian Muslim and Turkish minorities in the 1980s in Zlatko Enev's *Requiem for Nobody* (*Реквием за никого*, 2011), Martin Marinov's *The Veil* (*Булото*, 2014), Miroslav Penkov's *The Stork Mountain* (*Щъркелите и планината*, 2016), and Liudmila Mindova's *Novel for the Name* (*Роман за името*, 2017). The analysis focuses on the outlining of the thematic and structural similarities between the novels and the different approaches toward the depiction of trauma. I argue that this new trend is an attempt to rethink the legacy of the communist past and conceptualize collective trauma.

Keywords: Revival process; Bulgarian novel; cultural trauma; memory

1. Introduction

The so called "Revival process" (1984–1989), which euphemistically denotes the attempted ethnic assimilation of the Turkish minority during the 1980s (Kalinova, 2014, 568), with its historical, sociological and political aspects is still a controversial and highly debatable topic in the Bulgarian public discourse. Its presence in numerous scholar publications[1] and political debates over the three decades after its official denunciation by

[1] As Mihail Gruev and Aleksey Kalyonski claim in their book about the Muslim communities and the communist regime, "the increased interest in the topic without a doubt is due to the fact that in the years before the change [i.e. the fall of communism in 1989] there were almost no such studies and the existing ones were a product of the ideological and thematic control of the party-state. "The taboo" was suddenly lifted after 1989 and replaced by a real

the Bulgarian government in 1989 shows that the "Revival process" is an important part of recent national history; an especially controversial and traumatic one. Even though this topic is still a taboo in post-1989 Bulgarian literature (Chernokozhev, 2016, 102), there are several examples of its representation in different artistic forms: in novels, dramas, documentaries and movies, which indicate the necessity to rethink those events and incorporate them in the national memory. The article will not analyze the victim's memoirs or the witness reports, which are an important artifact deserving additional analysis on their own, but will try to interpret how those events from the second half of the 1980s are represented in the Bulgarian fiction prose from the last decade. Before I focus on the newest prose, which fictionalizes the "Revival process" or uses it as a historical background or a narrative thread, I will briefly outline the historical course of the "Revival process", its traumatic nature and its repercussions for the Bulgarian society as a whole.

2. Historical background

The "Revival process" has been the subject of numerous Bulgarian and foreign studies, which have showed the complicated and often inconsistent mechanisms of the assimilation policy toward the Bulgarian Muslim minorities and the ethnic Turkish communities in the last decades of the communist regime and described the social implications and the long lasting effects of those events on both victims[2] and witnesses. Additionally,

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flow of Bulgarian and foreign publications…" (Gruev, Kalyonski, 2008, 7; all quotes from Bulgarian sources are translated by the article's author).

[2] For more information, see the historico-sociological analysis of Djemile Ahmed in her article *Name, renaming and double identity* (Ahmed 2003), where the author, who has been affected as a child by the so-called "Revival process", discusses the consequences of the renaming on the creation of a double identity, because as she points out "during the «Revival process» there is a change of the name, but not a «forgetting of the own name». In this way the Turk lives with two names – two identities […]. That way he subjects himself to a double self-control: on the one hand, among «his own», he must be the same; not to forget who he is; to think and live as a Turk, and on the other hand, «outside», in front of the others and the institutions he must be Bulgarian; to think as one; he must not be neither «Bulgarian» in order not to be an outsider in his own community, nor «Turkish» in order not to receive the

this historical event has an international importance, as it can be viewed as "representative of the Balkan contradictions, demonstrating the region's significant potential for conflict" (Baeva, 2008, 100). In the Eastern European political context, the "Revival process" "demonstrated the crisis of late socialism and at the same time accelerated its downfall" (Baeva, 2008, 99).

The term "Revival process" defines the policy of the Bulgarian Communist Party and its leader Todor Zhivkov toward the ethnic and religious Turkish minorities in Bulgaria (Kalinova, Baeva, 2009, 5). Even though the term has gained currency, it has been criticized for its historical inaccuracy. As the Bulgarian literary critic Vihren Chernokozhev states, the term is inadequate because "the Revival process does not revive, it erases, destroys faiths and identities" (Chernokozhev, 2016, 102). The assimilation policy consisted of three components: "a forced replacement of the Turkish-Arabic names of the Bulgarian Turks with Bulgarian ones, a prohibition to use the Turkish language in public places, as well as a ban to perform rituals and wear clothes typical for the Turkish ethnic group" (Kalinova, Baeva, 2009, 5). This policy was implemented inconsistently, as the government alternated between the aforementioned cultural, linguistic and religious restrictions (Gancheva, 2013), forced relocations to other parts of the country or expulsions to Turkey[3] (Baeva, 2008, 102) and measures designed to improve the living and social conditions of the minorities (Kalinova, Baeva, 2009, 22). The assimilation practices affected the Turkish minority, but also the Bulgarian Muslims (the so-called Pomaks) and other ethnic and religious minorities as well (Gruev, Kalyonski, 2008, 13–105).

It is important to emphasize the fact that despite its peak manifestation in the second half of the 1980s, the assimilation process had begun after

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repressions of the all-seeing eye of the government" (Ahmed, 2003, 177). On the topic of the multiple identities, see also Mihail Gruev's case study on the Bulgarian Muslims (the so-called Pomaks) (Gruev, Kalyonski 2008, 87–105).

[3] The expulsion of the Bulgarian Turkish minorities happened in several large migration waves in the late 19th and the 20th century (Baeva, 2008, 102), which culminated in the so-called "Big Excursion" (1989), which euphemistically denotes the migration to Turkey of several hundred thousand Bulgarian Turks in the months before the fall of the communist regime with tourist visas, issued by the Bulgarian government. However, these events are connected not only to the internal affairs of Bulgaria, but to the international relations with Turkey and its external policy in the Balkans. For more information, see (Kalinova, Baeva, 2009).

Bulgaria's liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878 and was ideologically connected to the nation building efforts of the independent state in the late 19th and the 20th century. As historian Mihail Gruev points out, "the creation of a state organization in the modern era has an impact not only on the dominant ethnic, religious and cultural group [i.e. the Bulgarian majority in the liberated state], but also on the dominated, who were turned into minorities, especially after the fall of the large empires[4]" (Gruev, Kalyonski, 2008, 90). His colleague Aleksey Kalyonski elaborates that "the inconsistent and contradictory character" of the Bulgarian minority policy can be explained with the specific Bulgarian dynamics and "the unstable balance in the co-existence between the state, the majority and the minority" (Gruev, Kalyonski, 2008, 106). It is also important to note that this policy has been justified by the convoluted history of the region populated with Bulgarian Muslims. As the General Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Todor Zhivkov claimed in his speech at the 1967 Party plenum:

> The Turkish population in Bulgaria is not Turkish in its origin, because when the Turks conquered the country, no Turkish population came to Bulgaria… Therefore, our policy in the future should be the policy of incorporation and gradual unification of this population with the Bulgarian nation… We are aiming at the creation of a unified communist nation in the People's Republic of Bulgaria… (Baeva, 2008, 104).

Therefore, the argumentation that the religious and ethnic minorities were once an integral part of the Bulgarian nation[5], but were forcefully converted to Islam during the Ottoman rule, dominated the public discourse, scholar publications (Gruev, Kalyonski, 2008, 62), books and movies[6] during the communist era. This tendency can be seen as an attempt

[4] Aleksey Kalyonski describes the Bulgarian Turks as "a classic case of a relatively large minority, which finds itself within the borders of a national state in the process of disintegration from one of the premodern, «traditional» empires" (Gruev, Kalyonski, 2008, 106).

[5] A different view is presented by Ali Eminov in his article *Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria: A Brief History* (Eminov, 1997), published in a special issue of the journal "Islamic Studies" and dedicated to the presence of Islam in the Balkans, which confirms the controversial nature of the topic and its polemic potential.

[6] Probably the most famous example is Anton Donchev's novel *Time of Parting* (1964) and its film adaptation *Time of Violence* (1988). For more information, see Maria Todorova's study *Conversion to Islam as a Trope in Bulgarian Historiography, Fiction and Film* (Todorova, 2004).

to "heal the wound of the traumatic Ottoman past[7]" (Gruev, Kalyonski, 2008, 64), but the "Revival process" itself was a traumatic event – not only for those directly affected by it, but also for the whole Bulgarian society.

3. The "Revival process" as a cultural and collective trauma

The "Revival process" represents an important episode in Bulgarian history with traumatic consequences on both individual (for those affected by the renaming policy or forced to leave their homes during the "Big Excursion") and collective level (for the society which witnessed those events and had to deal with the feelings of guilt or responsibility for the wrongdoings). This second aspect of the "Revival process's" legacy resonates with the conceptual model of cultural trauma, proposed by such sociologists as Jeffrey C. Alexander (Alexander, 2004; 2012), Ron Eyerman (Eyerman, 2003), Piotr Sztompka and Neil J. Smelser (Alexander, 2004). Their theoretical model differs from the prevalent in the humanities psychological approach to trauma[8], which can be traced back to Freud's work on traumatic neurosis and hysteria and which is still relevant to literary theory. A key distinction, pointed by Alexander is that:

> Individual victims react to traumatic injury with repression and denial, gaining relief when these psychological defenses are overcome, bringing pain into consciousness so they are able to mourn. For collectivities, it is different. Rather than denial, repression, and "working through", it is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating stories and characters, and moving along from there. A "we" must be constructed via narrative and coding, and it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger (Alexander, 2012, 3).

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[7] This historical trauma is strongly reinforced in Bulgarian literature, where the Ottoman rule in Bulgaria has been traditionally described as aggressive, violent and oppressive. Such depictions can be seen in many classical works of 19th and 20th century Bulgarian literature.

[8] As Eyerman defines it, "[a]s opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of a great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion. In this sense, the trauma need not necessarily be felt by everyone in the community of experienced directly by any or all" (Eyerman, 2003, 2). For more thorough comparison between the psychological and the sociological theoretical model of trauma, see Alexander's *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma* and Smelser's *Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma* (Alexander (ed.), 2004).

What that theoretical approach suggests is that traumatic events can be experienced as painful and problematic for the collective as a whole, even if its members were not direct victims or witnesses of an event, and that cultural traumas are a collective construct with its "carrier groups" (e.g. writers, intellectuals, politicians), media representation and institutional arenas (Alexander, 2012, 15–26). However, this idea does not reject the importance of individual suffering nor it diminishes the significance of psychoanalytical work with those who lived through a traumatic experience (Alexander, 2012, 2). Rather, it presents a different approach toward trauma studies, which looks for the trauma's impact on the collective memory (as defined by Maurice Halbwachs) and the subsequent identity search of that group, because "[i]nsofar as traumas are experienced, and thus imagined and represented, the collective identity will shift" (Alexander, 2012, 26).

Following this theoretical concept, I argue that the recent interest in the "Revival process", as exemplified by several Bulgarian novels from the last decade, is an attempt to rethink the legacy of the communist era and conceptualize cultural trauma.

4. The newest Bulgarian novel and the memory of the "Revival process"

Even though after the political and social changes that marked the end of the communist era in Bulgaria authors ventured into exploring a variety of taboo and marginalized prior to 1989 topics, they rarely addressed the controversial theme of the "Revival process". Literary critic Vihren Chernokozhev[9] similarly notes that:

> Bulgarian literature in the last 25 years has been preoccupied with restoring its own identity replaced by socialist realism. Consciously or unconsciously, it did not and does not want to remember the aggression, which was cynically named "revival process".

[9] In 2015 in cooperation with prof. Zeynep Zafer from the University of Ankara, Chernokozhev also published the anthology *When they took away my name…* which presents "one totally unknown and not studied cross-border, cross-national and anti-totalitarian literature of the traumatic experience" (Chernokozhev, Zafer, 2015, 8) that can be read as a direct expression of the affected victims and an important witness report.

> Furthermore, those works that were published in the last decades as an opposition to the forgetting […] were rather an exception (Chernokozhev, 2016, 103).

However, there are several fictional novels, dramas and movies[10] from the last decades that turn to the "Revival process" as an important topic which deserves its artistic representation. Despite the mixed or sometimes even negative readers' reception (which can be partly explained by the taboo which those works break when speaking about the forced assimilation policy) they nevertheless pose serious questions about the recent past and the way the Bulgarian society should incorporate it in its national memory. Among those fictional works from the last decade are Zlatko Enev's *Requiem for Nobody* (2011), Martin Marinov's *The Veil* (2014), Miroslav Penkov's *The Stork Mountain* (2016), and Liudmila Mindova's *Novel for the Name* (2017).

These authors belong to different literary generations; for Penkov[11] and Mindova, the above mentioned works are their novelistic debuts, whereas for Marinov and Enev[12], the novels are their first works devoted to the "Revival process".

The novels under discussion share several narrative and thematic traits that concern their structure as well as the biographies of their characters, who witness or participate in the forced renaming or expelling of the Muslim and Turkish citizens. All four of the novels have fragmented structures and often move back and forth in time between the events

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[10] In her discussion of the documentaries *For just a Name* (1990), *Possible Distances* (1992) and *The Unneeded Ones* (1990), and the miniseries *Burn, Burn, Little Fire* (1994) historian Evgenia Kalinova points out that "the topic was sensitive and all four works were forms of «traumatic catharsis»". She states that "[d]espite the valuable documentary material, the first three films […] had very limited influence on the memory of the event", whereas the fourth one "had a significant impact", and "[t]he strong public response was predominantly negative", because "the film was viewed as a one-sided attempt to emphasize only the traumatic experience of those whose names were changed" (Kalinova, 2014, 576).

[11] Miroslav Penkov, who lives and works in the USA, became internationally famous with his short stories collected in the volume *East of the West*. His novelistic debut was awaited by critics and the audience alike and was published first in English and later in Bulgarian, in the author's own translation.

[12] Zlatko Enev is currently based in Germany, from where he edits the journal "Liberal review", in which he often publishes his critical and polemical views. His previous works include children's prose and the novel *One Week in Paradise*.

surrounding the "Revival process" and the previous decades of the communist regime (in Mindova's and Penkov's novels) or its aftermath (in Penkov's, Marinov's and Enev's works). Another common feature appearing in the discussed works is their critical position toward the totalitarian past.

The "Revival process" in the novels is either a central topic (*Requiem for Nobody*, *The Veil*) or a secondary/complementary thread (*Novel for the Name*, *The Stork Mountain*), but it is always presented in the larger sociopolitical context of the communist era and the post-1989 transition period. In the narratives one can find references to the World War II aftermath and the exodus of the Bulgarian Jews after the communists came to power; to the persecutions against Bulgarian intellectuals, the forced labor camps (in *Novel for the Name*), the violence and the repressions against civilians, as well as the ethnic and religious conflicts which followed the fall of communism in the Balkans (*Requiem for Nobody*) and the mass emigration to the West (*The Stork Mountain*). By referring all of these events, the novels highlight the fact that all of these traumatic experiences and painful memories, including the episodes of ethnic conflicts and assimilation practices, are part of the difficult legacy of the totalitarian past. As such, they cannot be viewed and examined separately and the "Revival process" should be equally represented and commemorated as a trauma for the collective that lived and witnessed it.

Although the four novels share those common thematic traits, which allow the audience to read them in a parallel way, they also differ in their depiction of the assimilation policy. Liudmila Mindova's work is more essayistic and combines the fictional story of several characters with an autobiographical thread[13] running throughout the novel. In *Novel for the Name*, the "Revival process" is not a central topic; it is rather one of the several narrative threads, which illustrate the repressive mechanisms of the totalitarian state. Thus the novel often refers to other works that represent and relate 20th century traumatic experiences; it quotes established trauma authors such as Primo Levi (Mindova, 2017, 26); enumerates

[13] Even the novel's epigraph, which states that "we, the characters of this novel, are fictional", points at the intertwinement between the authoress and the fictional characters in the novel and her identification with them.

Slavic authors who wrote about the forced labor camps (Mindova, 2017, 27) and mentions Bulgarian works that dealt with the trauma of the "Revival process" (Mindova, 2017, 147, 187). Thus the authoress points out the most significant traumas of the resent past and reflects on their effect on the identity of those affected by them. In her work, those traumatic experiences are embodied by the main character Azhar Ismailov. Born in a Jewish family during the World War II, he was separated as a baby from his relatives during the Allied bombing raids on the Bulgarian capital and raised by a Muslim family repressed by the communist regime. Forced to leave the country shortly before the beginning of the renaming campaign, he contemplates his fragmented identity:

> And so I, Azhar Ismailov, born in 1943 – a man, whose exact birth date, as I said, no one knows; a man with no age […] – have found that due to destiny's will I am bereft not only of age, but also of ethnic and religious affiliations. When someone asks me for my ethnicity, I just say "excursionist". I give the same definition of my denomination. Because I am Turkish, Jewish and Bulgarian at the same time… (Mindova, 2017, 195).

Zlatko Enev's novel approaches the topic differently and focuses directly on the repressive politics in the 1980s[14] and naturalistically depicts the violent measures as well as the brutality of the renaming campaign and the ensuing persecutions of the ethnic Turkish minorities. Here, the cynical ideological argumentation of the communist bureaucracy cannot conceal the negative emotions and the prejudice against the different ethnic and religious groups. The author traces back the roots of the Bulgarian animosity to the times of the Ottoman rule in the region. As one of the characters in the novel, the German teacher Marion, who provides the outside viewpoint on those events, states: "In the last one hundred years they are paying back for the yoke. For one hundred years the local Muslims have been second-class citizens, have been looked at askance, have been always oppressed, always persecuted" (Enev, 2011, 124). This foreign teacher is actually one of the few characters in the novel that openly questions the renaming

[14] The majority of the novel takes place in the last decade of the communist regime in Bulgaria, but in its last chapter it follows its characters after 1989 and shows the life of the perpetrators in the new sociopolitical situation. In its last part, the novel also departs from the "Revival process" and instead focuses on the breakup of Yugoslavia, drawing a parallel between the ethnic conflict from the 1980s in Bulgaria and the Yugoslavian wars.

policy and the humiliation of the "new Bulgarians", or rather "the former Turks" (Enev, 2011, 53).

In *The Stork Mountain*, the figure of the teacher is the one entrusted with enforcing the new assimilation policy, however, Penkov does not focus on the depiction of the "Revival process" per se; instead he subtly suggests that the conflict stems from the religious division between Christians and Muslims[15]. The narrator, who returns from America to his grandfather in Bulgaria, finds himself in a small village near the Turkish border burdened with ethnic tensions and cultural animosity between the Turkish and the Bulgarian neighborhoods. The historical traumas in Penkov's debut novel are revealed through flashbacks to the characters' past during communism and the painful experiences of the "Revival process" and the "Big Excursion." As the narrator learns more about the history of the region, he is confronted by his own family history and the role of his grandfather in the assimilation politics of the communist government. The narrator attempts to overcome the family past by forging a relationship with the imam's daughter, Elif, but his efforts prove to be futile and unable to bring the two communities closer. Even though Elif wants to escape the tyranny of her father and start her life anew, her relationship with the narrator ends up after the stillbirth of their child, which highlights the irreparability of the connection between the two young people and their respective communities.

The same trope of a stillborn or unwanted child of a Bulgarian-Muslim relationship appears in *Requiem for Nobody* and in *The Veil*. Marinov's novel follows the love story of the narrator with a Muslim girl, whom he meets accidentally on the same day she was forced to change her Turkish name into a Bulgarian one. Their relationship similarly does not last long and ends with the girl's eventual departure to Turkey (as in *The Stork Mountain*). The focus of the novel, however, is on the narrator's experience of catharsis, after years of struggling with the past and his own sense of guilt. Such ending may appear as wishful thinking which does not have a justification in the novel itself, but it shows the author's

[15] It is noteworthy that in the novel the origin of the Muslims community in that border region is again explained by the islamization during the Ottoman rule, as seen in the family history of the local imam, who traces his lineage from a Christian rebel who converted to Islam (Penkov, 2016, 86–89).

intention not only to evoke the events of the 1980s assimilation policy (which are briefly described in *The Veil*), but also to show the possibility for reconciliation between the two communities – even if it was only in a work of fiction.

5. Conclusions

Despite their different approach to the topic of the "Revival process", varied artistic value and critical reception, the four novels under discussion are part of a recent cultural and literary trend aiming to re-conceptualize the oppression of the Bulgarian Muslim and ethnic Turkish minorities under communism. The novels present the assimilation practices of the communist government as traumatic for the victims, the perpetrators, and the bystanders and as damaging for the interethnic relations and the society as a whole. With its potential to provoke controversy and to pose serious questions about the dramatic events of the 20th century, the topic that those novels raise can be viewed as highly representative for the debates over the tumultuous past of the Balkans and the general interest in the memory of the recent past that can be observed in the humanities and the post-1989 literature. And although the discussed authors present a rather pessimistic view on the interethnic relations burdened by historical conflicts and animosities, their novels can be seen as an attempt to provoke future discussion and possibly to inspire other works of art, which may contribute to the process of healing the wounds of the traumatic past.

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